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SHAMAN – RITUAL – PLACE

Sacred Sites and Spiritual Transformation

by Paul Faulstich

Throughout the world, tribal societies have held in sacred esteem certain locales within the physical environment. These places have been utilized for the purposes of shamanism, ritual, magic and mythologizing. Their origins are in mythology, and they provide a direct link with the spirit world. These sacred places are always demarcated by features of the environment, whether natural or human-made.

The sacred is that which allows a person to experience the numen. It allows for a transformation from everyday reality to a transcendent reality which joins people individually and collectively with forces greater than themselves. Sacred ritual sites illustrate in a concrete yet conceptual manner the way in which indigenous peoples

indigenous peoples, are rich in beauty, power and sacred history. Anthropologist Robert Berndt has referred to the "socio-psychic aura" that pervades such places.

Across wide geographic and cultural boundaries, we have evidence that people's relationship with the land is not simply social and economic, but religious as well. Sacred sites established lines of communication with the spirit world. Through this realm of cultural expression, people connected themselves with the mythological times and defined their place in the sacred scheme.

In Aboriginal Australia sacred places often symbolize ethereal beings, and in some cases are believed to be the literal transformations of spiritual creatures. Through these mythological places, other-

The Aboriginals hold these paintings, and the rocks they are on, to be metamorphosed body parts of Ancestral Beings. These paintings were created when totemic creatures of the mythological time wandered over the land leaving their influence in sacred places. The country was transformed, while the mythic beings took the form of the painted designs.

One sacred painting marks the place where several Ancestral Women painted themselves and stood peering up to a ceremonial cave on the opposite wall of the gap where men were involved in a ritual. The painting depicts a woman looking up at the cave as she leans against the rock.

Until recently, totemic rituals of the Witchetty Grub Totem were regularly executed at Emily Gap. The rock paintings, or pictographs, served a central role in these ceremonies, and they still invoke reverence from Aboriginals when they visit the site. The paintings at Emily Gap are visual representations of sacred events of tribal history. The tribe, clan, or totem develops a special relationship with a specific landscape and the mythological events that took place there. In Aboriginal Australia, it is often through art and the concept of ancestral transformation that the symbolic potency of the landscape is sanctified and made accessible to the people.

Shamanic experiences such as trance states are common at sacred places. The concept of physical and spiritual contact with mythological beings, and the places associated with them, is a central theme of shamanism. Through the recognition of sacred places, people contact the forces of their ultimate reality. One way the notion of contact is expressed throughout the world is by the motif of the hand stencil or hand print.

The Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest left hand prints at sacred places where they had prayed so that the supernatural spirits could identify the claimant. In Aboriginal Australia hand prints served various functions in contacting supernatural forces and the mythological Dreamtime. The Dreamtime is the sacred past when the universe was changed into its present form.

Thus, among the Aboriginals, shaman-

ism, art, rituals and myths incorporate ancestral transformations into contemporary life. During rituals, spiritual strength can be transmitted from the spiritual ancestors of a sacred site to the people involved. The sacred place transmits the power that lies beyond; power both vital and dangerous. Consequently, sacred sites manifest those qualities.

The association between shamanism and art has long been noted. The shamanic state of consciousness enables a person to perform acts of supernatural consequence. An individual in such a trance may achieve a state of communion with cultural deities, and he or she may transcend the limits of his or her physical body and fly to places beyond while the dormant "shell" of anatomy stays behind.

Shamanic activity appears to be represented in tribal art from wide geographic locations, ranging from the Paleolithic caves in Western Europe, to Africa, Australia and the Americas. In light of this prevalent theme in rock art, the large prehistoric murals of Baja California, which show human figures pierced by arrows, may not represent war scenes as has previously been speculated, but may, instead, illustrate shamanic events. The arrows in these cases would be prayer arrows, or "arrows of transcendence," and would be metaphorical for shamanic trance-death and flight. The themes of death and rebirth, and flight, are universal aspects of shamanic experiences.

The belief that shamans can metamorphose into the form of a guardian animal-spirit is widespread, and it is likely that some rock art that appears to represent animal forms actually pertains to shamanic activities. The painted animals in the shelters of Baja, then, may also take on a new significance.

The physical features of the sacred places are important. Sacred sites are often relatively inaccessible. Place itself becomes the mnemonic of transformative events and of individual and tribal histories.

Among the Aboriginals, the physical landscape, modified by symbolic categories through which it is understood, sustains a particular belief-system. The physical and cultural landscapes become metaphorical through an association allowing an image or place to re-present other concepts. Sacred places are symbols that operate at both the intellectual (reflective) and sensuous (non-reflective) levels. They are a way of resolving the physical/spiritual dichotomy by concretely defining and representing the transcendental nature of the sacred Dreamtime.

Totemic and clan centers are often associated with sacred places. Rites of passage and initiation ceremonies, which transform children into mature members of the group, are conducted at such sites. Shamanic activities, love magic, and sorcery are performed at these places. A unifying theme connects the places where these ceremonies are enacted; they are sacred grounds that aid in the transformations that take place there.

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These Aboriginal boys from the Warlpiri settlement of Yuendumu stand atop the "Giants Hole" — a shallow cave said to have been the home of a giant. In the Dreamtime the giant would terrorize the people of Yuendumu by throwing large boulders on them. One day, while the giant was asleep, the people of the tribe filled the hole with brush and lit it on fire, thus killing the monster. Places such as these are alive with Dreamtime influences, and these boys refused to enter the cave because of the danger of the giant.

around the world view themselves within the context of nature and super-nature; and how, through ritual, they transform the external environment from a mundane space to a sacred place.

Through the recognition of sacred spaces, the physical geography is transformed and integrated into symbolic cosmologies linking people to the forces of their religious convictions. Sacred sites, to the in-

vide abstract and invisible powers are given enduring, visible form. These sites are capable of affecting life and order in this world today.

The Aboriginals express the connection between the land and supernatural beings through their art. In Emily Gap near Alice Springs are several large and ancient designs painted on rock. Though many people would consider this art abstract, it is not.



Among the Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest, dances take place in the public courtyards. This photograph, taken at Zuni Pueblo around the turn of the century, shows Mudhead Kachinas, or Koyemisis. As ceremonial clowns, the Mudheads perform both as amusement and social comment on improper behavior. Their main function is to enforce tribal laws and oversee ceremonial activities.